



The Commission for
Local Administration in England

**The Local Government Ombudsman's
Annual Letter**

West Lindsey District Council
for the year ended
31 March 2007

The Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints by members of the public who consider that they have been caused injustice through administrative fault by local authorities and certain other bodies. The LGO also uses the findings from investigation work to help authorities provide better public services through initiatives such as special reports, training and annual letters.

Annual Letter 2006/07 - Introduction

This annual letter provides a summary of the complaints we have received about your authority. Where possible, we comment on the authority's performance and complaint-handling arrangements to assist with your service improvement.

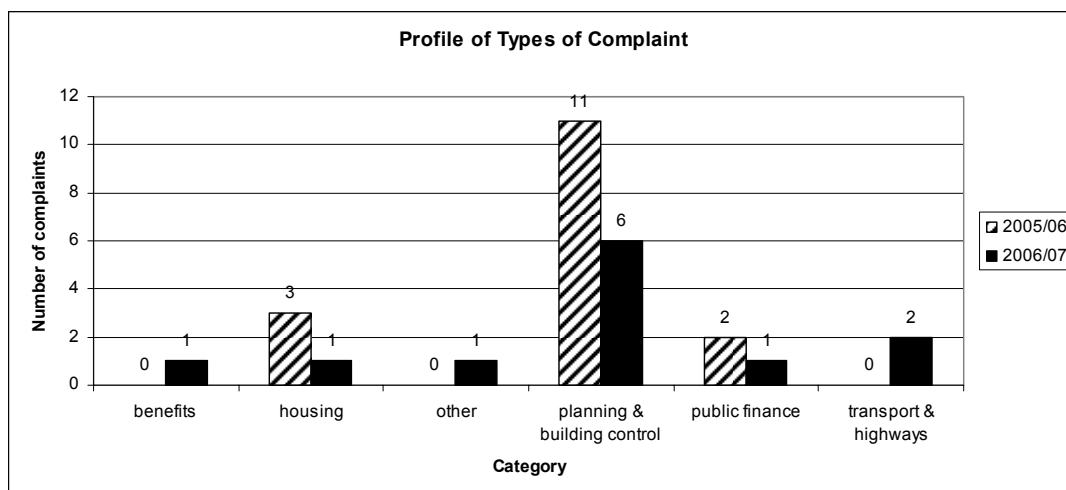
I hope that the letter will be a useful addition to other information your authority holds on how people experience or perceive your services.

Two attachments form an integral part of this letter: statistical data covering a three year period and a note to help the interpretation of the statistics.

Complaints received

I received 12 complaints about your Council in the year ending 31 March 2007. This was a reduction of four on the previous year.

The figures are too small to allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn about the Council's performance over the year. You will be interested in the change in the profile of the complaints.



As this chart illustrates, there is a much greater spread in the types of complaints I received. In 2005/06 complaints were greater in number and concentrated in just three service areas. This past year, the numbers reduced and were spread over a greater number of services areas. This is not necessarily a negative development and the Council might wish to reflect on whether it is the outcome of a more accessible complaint procedure that more people have felt able to use.

The other significant change in the profile of complaints is the reduction in the number of planning complaints. While they still account for 50% of all complaints I receive about your Council (which is higher than the national average of 23.6%) this is the third consecutive year the number has fallen. Since 2003/04, it has fallen from 26 to 6.

Decisions on complaints

Reports and local settlements

A 'local settlement' is a complaint that is resolved by the Council taking, or agreeing to take, action which we consider is a satisfactory response to the complaint so that the investigation can be discontinued. In 2006/07 27.7% of complaints dealt with by the three Local Government Ombudsmen

(excluding premature and those outside jurisdiction) were resolved by local settlement. When we complete an investigation we must issue a report.

In the 2006/07 year, I did not issue any reports about your Council.

Six complaints were settled locally. Of those six, three were about the same issue complained about by three separate people. While no trends or significant concerns emerged from my investigations it might interest the Council to reflect on the fact that two of the settlements were in respect of the administration of Council Tax (one of these settlements was on a complaint received at the end of the previous year).

Decisions

In addition to the six local settlements, I took seven decisions. The total of 13 decisions in the year differs from the number of complaints received because of work in hand at the start and finish of the year.

Of those seven decisions, one was a complaint I exercised discretion not to investigate, in four I found no evidence of maladministration (three of these were planning complaints) and the remaining two were 'premature' (in our view the Council had not been given adequate opportunity to investigate and resolve them for itself, so were returned to the Council to consider through its internal complaint procedure).

Other findings

As you are aware, we ask for comprehensive responses to our enquiries within 28 days. I am delighted to say your Council responded in 21 days on average. The reason I am so pleased with this response time is the previous year it was 32.4 days. I encourage your Council to continue to try to maintain these timescales while ensuring the quality of those responses remains high, reducing the need for additional enquiries.

Your Council's complaints procedure and handling of complaints

I know from the discussions my Assistant Ombudsman had had with your Customer Services Manager that your Council is committed to effective complaint handling and has made significant progress in improving its procedures over the last twelve months.

These improvements are supported by the information your Council publishes about your complaints procedure. This information is readily accessible through your web-site and I am pleased to see it contains direct reference to the LGO.

Training in complaint handling

Part of our role is to provide advice and guidance about good administrative practice. We offer training courses for all levels of local authority staff in complaints handling and investigation. The feedback from councils that have taken up the training is very positive.

The range of courses is expanding in response to demand and in addition to the generic Good Complaint Handling (identifying and processing complaints) and Effective Complaint Handling (investigation and resolution), we can run open courses for groups of staff from smaller authorities and also customise courses to meet your Council's specific requirements.

All courses are presented by an experienced investigator so participants benefit from their knowledge and expertise of complaint handling.

I have enclosed some information on the full range of courses available together with contact details for enquiries and any further bookings.

Liaison with the Local Government Ombudsman

The improvements in response times are evidence of the effectiveness of the liaison arrangements between our two organizations. I am grateful to the Council for its continued co-operation in this respect.

LGO developments

You may be interested in the development of our initiative to improve the first contact that people have with us. A new Access and Advice Service will provide a gateway to our services for all complainants and enquirers. It will encourage telephone contact but will also deal with email, text and letter correspondence. We will let you have further details about how it will operate and the expected timescales and discuss with you the implications for the Council.

I hope you have received our latest special report about telecommunications masts. It draws on our experience of dealing with complaints about planning applications for masts which can be highly controversial. We recommend simple measures that councils can adopt to minimise the chances of maladministration occurring.

In July we will be publishing a special report about the difficulties that can be encountered with complaints when local authorities deliver services or discharge their functions through partnerships. *Local partnerships and citizen redress* provides advice and guidance on how these problems can be overcome by good governance arrangements that include an effective complaints protocol.

Conclusions and general observations

I welcome this opportunity to comment on our experience of complaints about the Council over the past year. I hope that you find the information and assessment provided useful when seeking improvements to your Council's services.

Anne Seex
Local Government Ombudsman
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June 2007

Encs: Statistical data
Note on interpretation of statistics
Leaflet on training courses (with posted copy only)

Complaints received by subject area	Benefits	Housing	Other	Planning & building control	Public finance	Transport and highways	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	1	1	1	6	1	2	12
2005 / 2006	0	3	0	11	2	0	16
2004 / 2005	0	0	2	16	0	1	19

Note: these figures will include complaints that were made prematurely to the Ombudsman and which we referred back to the authority for consideration.

Decisions	MI reps	LS	M reps	NM reps	No mal	Omb disc	Outside jurisdiction	Premature complaints	Total excl premature	Total
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	0	6	0	0	4	1	0	2	11	13
2005 / 2006	0	2	0	0	3	0	1	7	6	13
2004 / 2005	0	1	0	0	4	7	3	4	15	19

See attached notes for an explanation of the headings in this table.

Response times	FIRST ENQUIRIES	
	No. of First Enquiries	Avg no. of days to respond
01/04/2006 - 31/03/2007	7	21.0
2005 / 2006	9	32.4
2004 / 2005	1	14.0

Average local authority response times 01/04/2006 to 31/03/2007

Types of authority	<= 28 days %	29 - 35 days %	> = 36 days %
District Councils	48.9	23.4	27.7
Unitary Authorities	30.4	37.0	32.6
Metropolitan Authorities	38.9	41.7	19.4
County Councils	47.1	32.3	20.6
London Boroughs	39.4	33.3	27.3
National Park Authorities	66.7	33.3	0.0